

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS  
DALLAS DIVISION

MICHAEL DEAN ISBELL,  
TDCJ No. 2472024,

Petitioner,

V.

DIRECTOR, TDCJ-CID,

Respondent.

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No. 3:24-cv-768-G-BN

**FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE  
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

Petitioner Michael Dean Isbell, a Texas prisoner, challenges his 2023 Johnson County, Texas conviction for possession of a controlled substance through a *pro se* application for a writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. *See* Dkt. No. 3. Isbell paid the filing fee. And Senior United States District Judge A. Joe Fish referred this habeas action to the undersigned United States magistrate judge for pretrial management under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) and a standing order of reference.

Because Isbell fails to show that, before resorting to Section 2254 relief, he fully and properly exhausted his state remedies as to the criminal judgment that he now challenges, the undersigned enters these findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation that the Court should dismiss the habeas application under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases (“Habeas Rule 4”) without prejudice to Isbell’s right to exhaust his state remedies.

**Discussion**

“[S]tate courts play the leading role in assessing challenges to state sentences

based on federal law.” *Shinn v. Kayer*, 592 U.S. 111, 124 (2020) (per curiam). A state prisoner must therefore fully exhaust state remedies before seeking federal habeas relief. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 2254(b)(1)(A); *Loynachan v. Davis*, 766 F. App’x 156, 159 (5th Cir. 2019) (“A federal court may not grant habeas relief unless the petitioner ‘has exhausted the remedies available in the courts of the State.’” (quoting 28 U.S.C. § 2254(b)(1)(A))).

This entails submitting the factual and legal basis of any claim to the highest available state court for review in a procedurally correct manner. *See Satterwhite v. Lynaugh*, 886 F.2d 90, 92-93 (5th Cir. 1989).<sup>1</sup>

Texas prisoners must present their claims to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals (“CCA”) in a petition for discretionary review or an application for state post-conviction relief. *See Bautista v. McCotter*, 793 F.2d 109, 110 (5th Cir. 1986).

And, while “[a] petitioner need merely press a claim through one of these avenues to exhaust that claim,” “[t]o exhaust a claim, it must also be presented in a

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<sup>1</sup> *See also Nickleson v. Stephens*, 803 F.3d 748, 753 (5th Cir. 2015) (“The exhaustion doctrine demands more than allusions in state court to facts or legal issues that might be comprehended within a later federal habeas petition. The exhaustion doctrine is based on comity between state and federal courts, respect for the integrity of state court procedures, and ‘a desire to protect the state courts’ role in the enforcement of federal law.” (quoting *Castille v. Peoples*, 489 U.S. 346, 349 (1989) (quoting, in turn, *Rose v. Lundy*, 455 U.S. 509, 518 (1982)))); *Loynachan*, 766 F. App’x at 159 (“To determine whether a § 2254 petitioner has exhausted a claim, his federal claim should be compared with the claim he raised in state court ‘It is not enough that all the facts necessary to support the federal claim were before the state courts or that a somewhat similar state-law claim was made.’ ‘Rather, the petitioner must afford the state court a “fair opportunity to apply controlling legal principles to the facts bearing upon his constitutional claim.” This reflects the fact in the habeas system, state courts are provided the first opportunity to assess the claim.’ (citations omitted)).

procedural context in which state courts necessarily review the claim on the merits.”  
*Loynachan*, 766 F. App’x at 159 (citations omitted).

Under Habeas Rule 4, a district court may summarily dismiss a Section 2254 habeas application “if it plainly appears from the face of the petition and any exhibits annexed to it that the petitioner is not entitled to relief in the district court.” *Id.*

This rule differentiates habeas cases from other civil cases with respect to *sua sponte* consideration of affirmative defenses. The district court has the power under [Habeas] Rule 4 to examine and dismiss frivolous habeas petitions prior to any answer or other pleading by the state. This power is rooted in “the duty of the court to screen out frivolous applications and eliminate the burden that would be placed on the respondent by ordering an unnecessary answer.”

*Kiser v. Johnson*, 163 F.3d 326, 328 (5th Cir. 1999) (quoting 28 U.S.C. foll. § 2254 Rule 4 Advisory Committee Notes); *see Rodriguez v. Dretke*, No. 5:04-cv-28-C, 2004 WL 1119704, at \*1 (N.D. Tex. May 17, 2004) (applying Habeas Rule 4 prior to the filing of an answer where this “Court [was] of the opinion that [the petitioner] has failed to exhaust his state court remedies” (citing *Kiser*)).<sup>2</sup>

While Isbell alleges that he has filed a state habeas petition in the state trial court, he fails to allege that the petition has been presented to the CCA. *See* Dkt. No. 3 at 3-5. And no records available online confirm that the petition has been presented

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<sup>2</sup> *See also Magouirk v. Phillips*, 144 F.3d 348, 357 (5th Cir. 1998) (“[T]here is no doubt that a federal court may raise *sua sponte* a petitioner’s failure to exhaust state law remedies and apply that doctrine to bar federal litigation of petitioner’s claims until exhaustion is complete.” (citations omitted)); *cf. Dispensa v. Lynaugh*, 847 F.2d 211, 217 (5th Cir. 1988) (“This requirement, that a petitioner who seeks federal redress must first seek relief in state courts and thus exhaust his state remedies, is not a jurisdictional prerequisite, but a prudential policy based on concerns for federalism.” (citations omitted)).

to Texas's highest criminal court. So the CCA has not had an opportunity to consider in a procedurally correct manner the claims that Isbell now intends to raise in federal court. He has thus failed to properly exhaust state remedies. And his Section 2254 application should be dismissed without prejudice under Habeas Rule 4. *See, e.g., Sam v. Louisiana*, 409 F. App'x 758, 763 (5th Cir. 2011) (per curiam) ("A federal district court may not adjudicate a habeas petition unless all claims in the petition are exhausted." (citing *Rhines v. Weber*, 544 U.S. 269, 274 (2005))).


### **Recommendation**

The Court should dismiss Petitioner Michael Dean Isbell's application for a writ of habeas corpus under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases without prejudice to his right to exhaust state remedies.

A copy of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); FED. R. CIV. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge's findings, conclusions, and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or

adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Auto. Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).

DATED: April 4, 2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Horan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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DAVID L. HORAN  
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE